



Digital campaigns in social networks: Impact of political content on the electoral decision of young people

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze how digital campaigns on social media influence young people's electoral decisions, integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence. A mixed design was applied with 200 interviews processed using Atlas.ti and 400 surveys modeled with partial least squares structural equation model in SmartPLS 4, ensuring reliability and validity (composite reliability ≥ 0.839 ; average variance extracted ≥ 0.640). The qualitative findings identified twelve discursive patterns, highlighting emotional storytelling, viral aesthetics, youth language, and humorous reappropriation as axes of connection and symbolic participation, while emotions such as inspiration, indignation, and empathy mobilized decisions, and fear and disillusionment discouraged participation. Quantitatively, the model explained 82.8% of the political effect (PE), with cognitive linkage as the main predictor ($\beta = 0.935$), emotional impact influencing cultural and performative evaluation ($\beta = 0.687$) and the latter showing a negative effect on the PE ($\beta = -0.306$). Political narrative (PN) had a strong impact on critical content evaluation (CCE) ($\beta = 1.006$). There was no modeled direct path from PN to PE; the low coefficient ($\beta = 0.095$) corresponds to CCE \rightarrow PE and was not statistically significant. It is concluded that youth political behavior is constructed in the interaction between emotion and cognition: cultural and affective codes activate symbolic participation, while rational understanding consolidates the voting decision,

showing that authenticity and emotional resonance weigh more than programmatic discourse in electoral preferences.

Keywords: digital campaigns, social media, youth politics, electoral decision-making, political communication

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary democratic dynamics are facing a structural reconfiguration marked by the digitization of communication processes and the rise of a young citizenry characterized by a connection to politics that no longer passes through traditional institutional channels (Paatelainen et al., 2022). This generation forms its electoral criteria in algorithmic environments mediated by platforms that prioritize interaction, audiovisual content, and emotion (Rodriguez-Saavedra et al., 2026a; Haleva-Amir, 2021; Vallés et al., 2021). According to Kemp (2024), 68% of Latin American youth between the ages of 18 and 24 consume political content from social media as their main source of information. In this context, politics is deinstitutionalized and adopts aesthetic formats that integrate entertainment, spectacle, and emotionality, displacing traditional notions of public deliberation (Darwin & Haryanto, 2021). This new communication architecture not only alters the channels of access to political discourse, but also the criteria by which young people build affinities, grant legitimacy, and consolidate voting decisions, thus articulating a fundamental problem that compromises the very way in which digital citizenship is exercised.

Research such as that by Kenski et al. (2022) and Zebib (2022) shows that in the Colombian presidential elections, 71% of the most shared political videos among users aged 16 to 25 were humorous, parodic, or highly emotional, to the detriment of those that developed programmatic proposals. A paradigmatic case of this logic is the rise of Javier Milei to the presidency of Argentina in 2023, whose digital campaign was consolidated on the basis of viral videos on TikTok, where he projected a disruptive, emotionally intense, and media-provocative figure. Instead of basing his discourse on rationalized platforms, Milei capitalized on the spectacularization of the political message, articulating iconic phrases such as “the caste is afraid” or provocative gestures that became memes, reels, and shorts reproduced millions of times by young audiences (Monaci & Persico, 2022). This trend creates a scenario where the political message becomes an audiovisual spectacle, and its success does not depend on the content itself, but on its ability to adapt to the languages and expectations of an audience that prioritizes the visual, the brief, and the emotional, representing politics as a consumable, fragmented, and spectacularized narrative that seeks to generate identification rather than reflection (Lehrner, 2021; Niu et al., 2021).

Given this scenario, young people’s electoral decisions are not based on rational analysis of proposals, but rather on a symbolic construct sustained by emotions and codes shared in digital communities. Political representation is redefined based on emotional closeness rather than track record. Research by Belcastro et al. (2022), based on 5,000 posts on TikTok, shows that the most influential content in young people’s voting decisions appealed to everyday life and emotions (Nwozor et al., 2022). This transformation reveals the shift in public opinion toward algorithmic platforms far removed from traditional democratic values (Lever & Elliot, 2023). In this environment, youth participation is not channeled through formal political institutions, but through ephemeral digital interactions that nevertheless produce cumulative and decisive effects on voting behavior. The act of voting thus becomes the culmination of a symbolic, emotional, and visual process that is constructed in everyday digital life (Alhaimer, 2025).

In this transition, young people construct their positions not through ideological doctrines, but through experiences of narrative consumption and shared symbolic practices. Digital campaigns are no longer a complement, but the core of contemporary electoral strategy. This is reflected in the study by Petkevic and Nai (2022), which reports that 62% of young voters in Latin America say they have been more influenced by political content on social media than by messages conveyed in traditional media.

This data reveals a profound phenomenon of the reconfiguration of representative democracy through interactive, emotional, and fragmented dynamics. Understanding this issue implies recognizing that political content on social media is not a reflection of campaigns, but rather a mechanism for structuring youth political meaning.

In this new paradigm, virality replaces discourse, emotion supplants ideology, and political loyalty is built on micro-experiences shared between peers (Azab, 2023; Shi & Dai, 2023). The public sphere is blurred in timelines that prioritize the fleeting, the controversial, or the provocative, while political references emerge not from parties, but from profiles that dominate the language of the algorithm. In a pre-election scenario leading up to the 2026 presidential elections, social media is consolidating itself as a key platform for political interaction with young people.

This context allowed for an analysis of the political content in circulation and its effect on youth electoral decision-making, giving the study timeliness and current relevance. Despite the widespread use of social media in political campaigns, there is limited scientific understanding of how political content symbolically and emotionally influences youth voting decisions. While several studies address the virality and reach of campaigns, few analyze the interpretive, affective, and narrative processes that mediate this influence, especially from a mixed perspective that combines quantitative and qualitative data. Therefore, the study aims to analyze digital campaigns on social media and their impact on political content regarding youth electoral decisions.

This study offers three contributions that distinguish it from previous research. First, it integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches through a mixed-method design that combines Atlas.ti discourse analysis with partial least squares structural equation model (PLS-SEM) modeling in SmartPLS 4, allowing for the triangulation of symbolic-emotional patterns with statistically validated causal relationships. Second, it focuses on young Peruvian voters during the pre-election period leading up to the 2026 presidential elections, a Latin American context that is underrepresented in the literature on digital political communication. Third, the structural model explains 82.8% of the political effect (PE) and identifies the cognitive link as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.935$), demonstrating that cognition and emotion function as complementary forces in shaping electoral decisions, rather than opposing forces.

Hypothesis

The study's hypothesis is digital campaigns on social media have a positive impact on the electoral decisions of young voters. The specific objectives are:

1. **H1.** Political narrative (PN) has a significant positive effect on cognitive bonding (CB) among young voters aged 18 to 25.
2. **H2.** Emotional impact (EI) has a significant positive effect on cultural and performative evaluation (CPE) among young voters.
3. **H3.** Political consumption (PC) has a significant positive effect on critical content evaluation (CCE) in young voters.
4. **H4.** CPE has a significant positive effect on digital narrative conditioning (DNC).
5. **H5.** CB has a significant positive effect on PE, representing the final electoral decision.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concept of youth citizenship has undergone a significant transformation with the emergence of digital environments as central spaces for political socialization (Rodriguez-Saavedra et al., 2026b). Unlike traditional forms of participation such as party membership or presence in formal deliberative spaces, young people have shifted their civic practices to platforms where interaction is shaped by the symbolic, the identity-based, and the emotional.

According to Mohd Suki et al. (2023), this generation does not engage in political participation through structured activism, but rather through intermittent yet intensely symbolic actions, such as sharing content, commenting on posts, or viralizing discourses that resonate with their emotions and values. This shift has reconfigured the classic indicators of participation, overflowing institutionalism toward more fluid forms of political action (Fazio et al., 2023).

Authors such as Ummar et al. (2023) and Adamczewska (2024) argue that the digital environment has favored the emergence of a performative citizenship, where the act of expressing opinions or making content go viral replaces traditional participation. In this way, politics is transformed into an everyday practice

mediated by the consumption of short, visual, and emotionally stimulating narratives. This change does not imply depoliticization, but rather a reconfiguration of civic engagement, which is now guided by criteria of authenticity, symbolic affinity, and algorithmic logic. According to the study by Tunkl et al. (2023), 64% of young people in Latin America say they exercise their right to political opinion through social media, which reaffirms the role of these platforms as predominant venues for informal political education.

Guess et al. (2023) report that digital campaigns have developed a specific grammar aimed at optimizing attention, emotional connection, and the capacity for virality. This grammar is not limited to verbal language, but centrally incorporates the use of viral sounds, dynamic transitions, visual filters, and vertical formats that are adapted to the interfaces of TikTok, Reels, and Instagram stories. Dey et al. (2023) and Lestaluhu et al. (2023) highlight that contemporary PN is structured around audiovisual micro-stories that condense values, emotions, and ideological positions into segments lasting between 7 and 30 seconds.

For Cuervo and González (2024), these narratives stand out for appealing to the everyday and the emotional, using formats that appear to be spontaneous or relatable. According to the analysis by Ayub et al. (2024) and Larsson et al. (2024), candidates who appeared in domestic settings, using colloquial language and unrehearsed gestures, achieved interaction levels up to 48% higher than those who replicated an institutional or stilted style. This transformation implies a reinterpretation of the political ethos, where perceived authenticity and the ability to generate emotional identification become more valued attributes than technical experience or party affiliation (Stromer-Galley & Rossini, 2024). The campaign does not seek to convince through argument, but rather to generate an emotional bond based on cultural codes recognizable to young voters (Chan et al., 2023).

Youth political performativity is not limited to the act of voting but manifests itself as a sequence of symbolic and media actions that precede, accompany, and follow the formal election. These actions include sharing memes, recording reactions to speeches, participating in political challenges, or positioning hashtags during election periods. According to Cranmer et al. (2024) and Smolak Lozano (2024), this performativity constitutes an “expanded political presence,” where young people become political actors not from within the institutional structure, but from their role as creators, curators, and disseminators of content on digital platforms (Haugsgjerd & Karlsen, 2024).

According to Cristófol-Rodríguez et al. (2024), the algorithmic environment intensifies this performativity by rewarding actions that generate greater engagement and social feedback. As a result, young voters end up being exposed mainly to content that confirms their affective and cultural frameworks, diminishing critical deliberation and reinforcing emotional identities around figures or causes (Geise et al., 2024). This logic generates an ecosystem where voting is not explained solely by ideology or proposals, but by a prior chain of media experiences that have shaped the desire for adherence through shared affective practices (Gerbaudo, 2024; Magin et al., 2024).

On the other hand, campaign narratives are no longer structured linearly around programmatic proposals but are fragmented into easily shareable micro-stories that appeal to personal experience, everyday life, or disruption. According to Bhardwaj et al. (2024), the success of these short stories lies in their ability to integrate seamlessly into the user’s algorithmic feed, stimulating interaction and maximizing visibility. This logic favors visual and emotional content over reflective or argumentative content. Thus, political actors must compete not only with other candidates, but also with content creators, influencers, and viral memes, who share the same digital attention space (Oschatz et al., 2024). Various studies, such as Hatcher (2025) and Merivaki et al. (2024), have shown that young people between the ages of 18 and 25 are not politically mobilized by rational discourse, but rather by narratives that arouse emotions and construct meaning from the affective. Persico (2024) showed that during the Colombian elections, the political content that achieved the most engagement among young people was humorous, empathetic, or provocative.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

The research was conducted using a mixed approach, combining qualitative and interpretative analysis with quantitative validation (Rodríguez-Saavedra et al., 2025). The study was basic in nature, as it sought to expand knowledge about the impact of digital campaigns on youth voting decisions (Yeo & Chu, 2025). The level of research was explanatory (Urman & Makhortykh, 2025). The mixed design allowed for triangulation

Table 1. Structure of the qualitative interview protocol

Thematic area	I	Theoretical basis	n
Exposure and consumption of PC	PC	Mohd et al. (2023) & Tunkl et al. (2023)	2
Emotional responses to PN	EI	Belcastro et al. (2022) & Nwozor et al. (2022)	3
Interpretation and evaluation of political messages	CCE	Cuervo and González (2024) & Stromer-Galley and Rossini (2024)	3
Influence on voting intention	PE	Cranmer et al. (2024) & Guess et al. (2023)	2

Note. I: Indicator & n: Number of questions

of qualitative findings (discourse and emotions) with quantitative evidence (PLS-SEM model), reinforcing the internal and external validity of the study.

This research was conducted in the run-up to the 2026 presidential elections, a period of active social media use in youth political interaction. This timing allowed for the observation of key communication phenomena and the measurement of the impact of political content in real time, reinforcing the analytical relevance of the study. The fieldwork was carried out between January and June 2025, for both the qualitative and quantitative phases.

In the qualitative phase, a digital ethnographic design was used, which allowed for the observation and analysis of young people's communication practices on social media such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. In the quantitative phase, a non-experimental, cross-sectional design was used, employing a structural equation model applied with SmartPLS software to validate the hypotheses proposed (Borchers, 2025).

Population and Sample

Young people between the ages of 18 and 25, eligible to vote and living in urban areas, were selected. They had to be active social media users, accessing it at least five times a week and spending at least 30 minutes a day on it, including recent interactions with political content. The call for participants was made through digital forms distributed in specific social media groups. Before responding, participants confirmed that they met the established criteria by filling out a pre-selection form focused on their digital habits and PC, while maintaining anonymity at all times (Tawiah, 2025). The overrepresentation of young people with greater digital access is acknowledged, which limits the generalization of the results to populations with lower connectivity.

In the qualitative phase, 200 participants were worked with until theoretical saturation was reached. In the quantitative phase, non-probabilistic purposive sampling was applied, with participants recruited through social media groups and voluntary response forms, yielding 400 valid responses that met the inclusion criteria. Given the non-probabilistic design, sampling errors and confidence levels are not reported; instead, the adequacy of the sample is based on PLS-SEM criteria and the statistical power achieved for the proposed model.

Data Collection Tools

For the qualitative phase, a semi-structured interview technique was used, with a script of 10 open-ended questions developed based on the study categories and validated by experts. **Table 1** presents the structure of the interview protocol, including the thematic areas, indicators, theoretical basis, and number of questions per dimension.

A pilot test was conducted with 30 participants to verify the clarity of the questions, and then it was administered to 200 young people through recorded virtual interviews. The coding and analysis of the responses were performed using Atlas.ti software.

In the quantitative phase, a structured survey technique was applied, consisting of 17 closed items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = always). The questionnaire was validated by experts and pilot tested with 50 young people, obtaining a Cronbach's alpha of 0.890, which confirmed its reliability and the clarity of the items. It was then administered virtually to a sample of 400 young people, and the data were analyzed using the PLS-SEM model with SmartPLS software.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted under the ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent, and data protection. All participants were informed about the objectives of the research and agreed to participate voluntarily by means of a clear and accessible digital informed consent form, which guaranteed their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was ensured in interviews and surveys, avoiding the disclosure of personal data. In accordance with the regulations of the Research Ethics Committee at the Technological University of Peru, code INV-RG004 (version V05), the research did not involve vulnerable populations or situations of ethical risk and therefore did not require formal approval by the Committee.

Data Analysis

Qualitative phase

The interview responses were analyzed using Atlas.ti software through thematic analysis. The process followed three stages:

- (1) open coding, identifying initial codes from the raw data;
- (2) axial coding, grouping codes into thematic categories; and
- (3) selective coding, integrating the categories into the final analytical framework.

Two researchers independently coded 25% of the interviews ($n = 50$). Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient, yielding a coefficient of $\kappa = 0.81$, indicating substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The frequency values represent the total number of segments coded by category.

Quantitative phase

The survey data were analyzed using the PLS-SEM with SmartPLS 4. This technique was selected for its robustness with non-normal distributions, exploratory models, and small to medium sample sizes (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis was conducted in two stages:

- (1) evaluation of the measurement model using internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha \geq 0.70$, composite reliability [CR] ≥ 0.70) and convergent validity (average variance extracted [AVE] ≥ 0.50) and
- (2) evaluation of the structural model using path coefficients (β), the coefficient of determination (R^2), and effect size (f^2).

Significance was tested using bootstrapping with 5000 subsamples and a confidence level of 95%.

RESULTS

This section presents the findings of the study. In the qualitative phase, 200 interviews were analyzed with Atlas.ti to identify interpretive patterns. In the quantitative phase, surveys were administered to 400 young people and the data were processed with SmartPLS to measure the effect of digital political content on voting intention.

Digital PNs

Qualitative analysis identified twelve core codes associated with how young people interact with PNs on social media. Based on open coding in Atlas.ti, recurring discursive patterns were constructed that reflect the type of political content that most influences decision-making and digital participation. **Table 2** summarizes the main codes, frequency, narrative patterns observed, and representative quotes from participants.

The results show that emotional and visual content is central to young people's connection with political messages. The use of humor, emotional storytelling, and visual resources as triggers for symbolic participation stands out. Likewise, there is a tendency toward fragmentation and reinterpretation of political content, adapted to youth cultural codes, which reflects a new form of political participation mediated by digital logic.

Table 2. Main codes and discursive patterns in digital PNs

Main code	F	Description of narrative pattern	Representative quote
Emotional storytelling	54	Personal stories with emotional impact	<i>"When the candidate talked about his family's struggle, I felt it was real"</i> (P14)
Affective influence	47	Emotions such as outrage, tenderness, or enthusiasm	<i>"If a video makes me angry or moved, I share it immediately"</i> (P32)
Viral aesthetics	41	Use of music, rapid editing, and striking visual resources	<i>"Good editing and music make me keep watching; if not, I scroll"</i> (P167)
Youth language	38	Slang, emojis, informal tone	<i>"When politicians talk like us, I feel they understand me"</i> (P23)
Emotional leadership	35	Support for leaders based on charisma rather than proposals	<i>"I don't care much about proposals, but when he speaks, he transmits something"</i> (P51)
Symbolic participation	33	Use of hashtags, stickers, reactions	<i>"I share the hashtag; it's my way of saying what I think"</i> (P89)
Political humor	29	Memes, irony, and satire of public figures	<i>"Memes say more than a speech; they make you laugh and think"</i> (P42)
Ephemeral participation	27	Occasional interactions without political continuity	<i>"I only comment on politics when something goes viral"</i> (P76)
Narrative fragmentation	26	Brief and decontextualized content	<i>"I watch 15-second videos; I don't have time for long explanations"</i> (P18)
Political contrast	24	Direct comparison between candidates or proposals	<i>"Videos that show one versus the other help me decide"</i> (P63)
Digital reappropriation	22	Creative use of political material to give it new meaning	<i>"I take the politician's phrase and turn it into my own meme"</i> (P95)
Cultural references	20	Use of icons, music, or popular phrases	<i>"When they use a trending song, it catches my attention more"</i> (P137)

Note. F: Frequency

Table 3. Main codes and discursive patterns regarding the interpretation of PC

Main code	F	Description of narrative pattern	Representative quote
Cultural identification	49	Use of slang, expressions, or symbols familiar to young people	<i>"If they use words I use with my friends, the message feels for me"</i> (P28)
Humorous reappropriation	42	Critical transformation through memes or irony	<i>"I turn everything into a meme; it's how I express what I think"</i> (P54)
Narrative interest	40	Preference for content with a story structure	<i>"I like when there's a beginning, a problem, and an ending"</i> (P71)
Ideological rejection	37	Detection of manipulation, contradiction, or propaganda	<i>"When I see it's pure propaganda, I stop watching"</i> (P19)
Consistency assessment	31	Informal analysis of the candidate's history and actions	<i>"I check what they did before; if it doesn't match, I don't believe them"</i> (P183)
Moral coding	30	Ethical evaluation of messages or candidates	<i>"I evaluate if the candidate is a good person, not just a good politician"</i> (P46)
Discursive saturation	26	Constant repetition of similar messages	<i>"I get tired of seeing the same political content all day"</i> (P62)
Breaking expectations	24	Surprise at disruptive or unusual messages	<i>"When a candidate does something unexpected, it catches my attention"</i> (P139)

Note. F: Frequency

Interpretation of Political Content

This dimension analyzed the meanings that young people attribute to the political content they consume on social media. Through thematic coding, eight main codes were identified: cultural identification, ideological rejection, humorous reappropriation, evaluation of coherence, discursive saturation, moral coding, narrative interest, and disruption of expectations.

These categories reflect how young people interpret political content not only from a rational perspective, but also from symbolic, ethical, and communicational dimensions. **Table 3** is presented below for a better understanding.

These findings reveal that young people not only consume political content superficially, but also actively interpret it based on its symbolic, ethical, and emotional context. Cultural identification and humorous reappropriation stand out as key mechanisms for reinterpreting political messages and giving them meaning.

Table 4. Main codes and emotional effects on voting intention

Main code	F	Type of emotion	Representative quote
Political inspiration	46	Hope	<i>"When I hear about change and a better future, I feel like voting"</i> (P122)
Moral outrage	44	Anger, frustration	<i>"Corruption videos make me furious; I would never vote for that"</i> (P57)
Citizen empathy	41	Tenderness, compassion	<i>"When I see someone who truly cares about people, I want to support them"</i> (P34)
Critical humor	39	Fun, irony	<i>"A good political meme convinces me more than a boring speech"</i> (P81)
Fear of regression	35	Fear, insecurity	<i>"I vote against the one I fear most, not for the one I like"</i> (P48)
Political disillusionment	33	Apathy, skepticism	<i>"I don't believe any of them anymore; maybe I'll vote blank"</i> (P69)
Generational pride	32	Identity, self-esteem	<i>"Voting is part of who we are as young people"</i> (P116)
Collective euphoria	29	Enthusiasm	<i>"When everyone shares the same candidate, the enthusiasm is contagious"</i> (P93)

Note. F: Frequency

Table 5. Reliability and validity of the measurement model

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	pA	CR	AVE
DNC	0.776	0.968	0.892	0.806
PC	0.711	0.841	0.839	0.801
PE	0.890	0.863	0.856	0.750
CCE	0.818	0.867	0.893	0.739
CPE	0.840	0.879	0.904	0.760
EI	0.822	0.882	0.916	0.846
PN	0.818	0.870	0.893	0.739
CL	0.877	0.880	0.942	0.890

In turn, ideological rejection and consistency assessment show a critical reading that is activated in the face of discursive inconsistencies. This interpretation process is crucial to understanding how the relationship between political content and youth voting intentions is constructed, which is addressed in the following section.

EI on Voting Decisions

Emotions have a direct effect on youth voting decisions. Content that arouses hope, indignation, or empathy generates greater emotional connection and triggers immediate responses such as sharing, commenting, or rejecting messages. Far from rational analysis, young people respond to what moves them or represents their values, thus consolidating their political preferences. Likewise, it was evident that emotions such as fear and disenchantment reinforce polarized positions or reduce voter turnout. Rather than informing, social media becomes a stage where emotions shape youth electoral behavior. **Table 4** is presented for further understanding.

Table 4 shows that codes such as political inspiration and moral outrage were the most frequent, indicating that voting intentions are highly influenced by messages that inspire hope or rejection. Critical humor and citizen empathy also stand out for their ability to generate emotional connection, facilitating the acceptance of political discourse. On the other hand, negative emotions such as fear or disenchantment decrease electoral engagement, showing that EI can both mobilize and inhibit youth voting.

Quantitative Results

To analyze the relationship between the variables proposed in the theoretical model, a quantitative approach was applied using the PLS-SEM technique, through SmartPLS 4 software.

Reliability and validity of the measurement model

In this first stage of the analysis, the internal reliability and convergent validity of the measurement model were evaluated. To do this, Cronbach's alpha coefficient, the Rho_A coefficient, CR, and AVE were calculated for each construct.

The values obtained are presented in **Table 5**, showing that all indicators exceed the minimum acceptable thresholds, which supports the internal consistency of the scales used. **Table 5**, corresponding to the reliability and validity of the measurement model, is presented below.

Table 6. Fornell-Larcker matrix

	DNC	PC	PE	CCE	CPE	EI	PN	CL
DNC	0.898							
PC	0.711	0.895						
PE	0.826	0.880	0.866					
CCE	0.710	0.776	0.733	0.865				
CPE	0.659	0.655	0.675	0.863	0.872			
EI	0.554	0.502	0.600	0.724	0.848	0.920		
PN	0.611	0.747	0.774	0.774	0.724	0.820	0.860	
CL	0.862	0.866	0.851	0.841	0.853	0.676	0.852	0.943

Table 7. HTMT

	CCE	CPE	CL	DNC	EI	PC	PE
CPE	0.912						
CL	0.845	0.867					
DNC	0.756	0.694	0.841				
EI	0.781	0.908	0.702	0.618			
PC	0.819	0.687	0.854	0.732	0.523		
PE	0.764	0.708	0.867	0.849	0.631	0.875	
PN	0.842	0.791	0.878	0.645	0.803	0.768	0.815

The reliability and convergent validity results confirm the robustness of the measurement model. All constructs reported Cronbach's alpha values above 0.711, with the highest being that of the PE at 0.890, demonstrating adequate internal consistency. Similarly, CRs exceeded 0.839 and the AVE was greater than 0.640, meeting the criteria required in rigorous empirical studies. Cognitive linkage (CV) and EI stood out with the highest indicators, reinforcing the convergent validity of the scales applied. The slight deviations between α , ρ_A , and CR reflect the heterogeneity of some indicators, but all constructs remain within the accepted thresholds ($CR \geq 0.70$; $AVE \geq 0.50$), confirming the robustness of the measurement model.

Fornell-Larcker matrix

Table 6 shows the Fornell-Larcker matrix, which allows the discriminant validity between the constructs of the model to be evaluated. According to this criterion, the square root of the extracted variance, indicated on the main diagonal, must be greater than the correlations with the other constructs. This condition is met in all cases.

The Fornell-Larcker matrix shows that the diagonal values (\sqrt{AVE}) exceed the correlations between constructs, confirming discriminant validity. CV (0.943), EI (0.920), and DNC (0.898) stand out for their higher \sqrt{AVE} , which reinforces their conceptual soundness.

To complement the discriminant validity assessment, the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio was calculated, as recommended by recent methodological literature (Henseler et al., 2015). **Table 7** presents the HTMT values for all construct pairs.

HTMT analysis revealed that two construct pairs exceeded the 0.90 threshold: CCE-CPE (0.912) and EI-CPE (0.908). This proximity is theoretically consistent: CCE and cultural-performative evaluation share interpretive cognitive mechanisms, as both involve assessing political messages through cultural and ethical lenses. Similarly, EI naturally shapes how young people construct cultural meanings, since affective responses precede and influence symbolic interpretations. Despite this overlap, constructs were retained separately to preserve analytical granularity. Future research may explore integrating these into a second-order factor structure.

Evaluation of the structural model

The relationships between latent constructs were evaluated using standardized β , considering the direction, magnitude, and statistical significance of the effects. **Figure 1** shows the impact of digital campaigns on PE.

The structural model showed that the PE was explained by 82.8%, reflecting a high level of incidence of the constructs analyzed. CV had the greatest positive impact on the PE ($\beta = 0.935$), confirming that rational

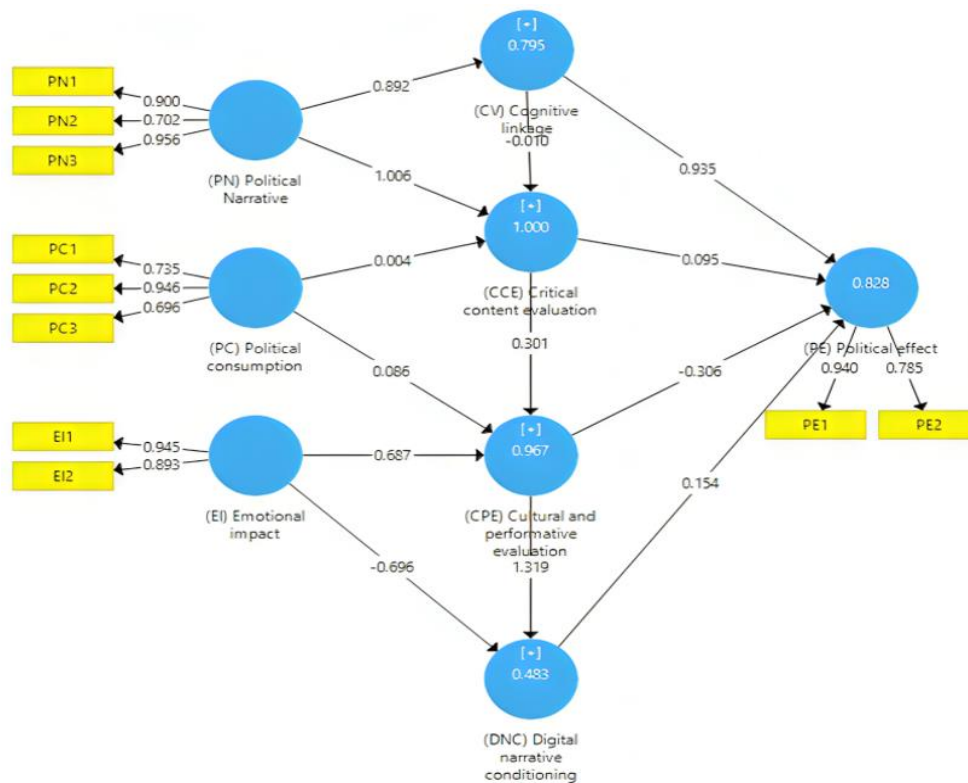


Figure 1. Estimated structural model of the impact of digital campaigns on political effect (Source: Prepared by the authors using SmartPLS)

Table 8. R², adjusted R², and f² in the structural model

Dependent variable	R ²	Adjusted R ²	f ²
DNC	0.483	0.467	DNC → PE (0.032)
PE	0.828	0.817	CCE → PE (0.009)
CCE	0.762	0.755	PC → CCE (0.069), CV → CCE (0.430), PN → CCE (4.273)
CPE	0.967	0.966	PC → CPE (0.099), EI → CPE (6.844)
CL	0.795	0.792	PN → CV (3.887)

understanding of digital content directly influences young people’s electoral decisions. CCE had a low effect ($\beta = 0.095$), showing that critical reflection is not a decisive factor. In contrast, CPE had a negative effect ($\beta = -0.306$), indicating that symbolic and cultural interpretations of messages tend not to translate into political action. EI influenced CPE ($\beta = 0.687$), demonstrating that emotions strengthen the symbolic reinterpretation of content on social media.

R² coefficients, adjusted R², and f² effect

This stage of the analysis revealed the explanatory power of the constructs within the structural model, providing quantitative arguments that support the understanding of youth political behavior in response to digital campaigns. **Table 8** shows the values obtained.

The structural model showed high levels of explanation. The PE reached an R² of 0.828, explained by CCE and DNC. CCE had an R² of 0.762, influenced mainly by PN. CPE obtained an R² of 0.967, mainly based on EI. CV registered an R² of 0.795, explained by PN, while DNC reached an R² of 0.483, showing a moderate impact on the PE.

The high R² value of CPE = 0.967 warrants clarification. This construct is mainly predicted by EI (f² = 6.844), representing a theoretically strong relationship: emotional responses are fundamental to how young people construct cultural and performative meanings from political content. The high explanatory power reflects the importance of affect in shaping symbolic interpretations, in line with the literature on affective politics and youth participation (Belcastro et al., 2022; Gerbaudo, 2024). Furthermore, CPE shares conceptual proximity with its predictors, as confirmed by HTMT values (EI-CPE = 0.908). While this does not indicate a measurement

Table 9. Stone-Geisser's Q² predictive relevance

Endogenous construct	Q ²
DNC	0.412
PE	0.586
CCE	0.498
CPE	0.724
CL	0.539

Table 10. β coefficients and significance of structural relationships

Relationship	β	t-statistic	p	Significance
DNC → PE	0.154	1.330	0.184	Not significant
PC → CCE	0.004	0.798	0.425	Not significant
PC → CPE	0.086	2.424	0.015	Significant
CCE → PE	0.095	0.595	0.552	Not significant
CCE → CPE	0.301	4.642	< 0.001	Significant
CPE → DNC	1.319	4.243	< 0.001	Significant
CPE → PE	-0.306	2.120	0.034	Significant inverse
EI → DNC	-0.696	2.057	0.040	Significant inverse
EI → CPE	0.687	14.925	< 0.001	Significant
PN → CCE	1.006	125.234	< 0.001	Significant
PN → CV	0.892	33.278	< 0.001	Significant
CV → PE	0.935	5.033	< 0.001	Significant
CV → CCE	-0.010	0.842	0.400	Not significant

error, it suggests that future research could explore a more parsimonious model or a second-order factor structure that integrates these constructs.

To assess the predictive relevance of the model, Stone-Geisser's Q² values were calculated using the blindfolding procedure. **Table 9** presents the Q² values for each endogenous construct.

All Q² values exceeded zero, confirming that the model has predictive relevance (Hair et al., 2019). The highest predictive power was observed for CPE (Q² = 0.724) and PE (Q² = 0.586), indicating that the structural model effectively predicts these key constructs.

Significance analysis (β)

This stage allowed us to verify the strength and statistical significance of the relationships proposed in the structural model. The analysis of the standardized coefficients (β), t values, and significance levels (p) allowed us to identify the paths with the greatest impact on youth political dynamics. **Table 10** presents the results obtained.

The results showed that CV was the main determinant of PE (β = 0.935), confirming its decisive role in activating electoral decision-making. PN was strongly related to CCE (β = 1.006), which in turn influenced CPE (β = 0.301). Inverse effects were also identified for EI on DNC (β = -0.696) and CPE on PE (β = -0.306). These findings reflect tensions between the symbolic, rational, and emotional spheres, showing that youth decisions on social media are shaped by the interaction of these aspects.

The β CPE → DNC (β = 1.319) exceeds the typical standardized range due to a suppressor effect. This occurs because EI → DNC (β = -0.696) exerts an opposing directional effect on the same dependent variable. When predictors share variance through opposite signs, one coefficient may exceed 1.0, which is methodologically documented in PLS-SEM literature (Hair et al., 2019). The relationship remains statistically significant (t = 4.243, p < 0.001) and theoretically coherent.

DISCUSSION

H1. The results confirmed that digital campaigns targeting young people used discursive, visual, and performative strategies that captured their attention and stimulated political recall. In the qualitative phase, humor, memes, and viral aesthetics stood out as the most remembered and shared resources, reinforcing the idea that communicational effectiveness is based on adapting messages to youth cultural codes. This finding coincides with research showing how humor and audiovisual creativity drive political participation on

platforms such as TikTok and Instagram (Kenski et al., 2022; Monaci & Persico, 2022; Petkevic & Nai, 2022; Zebib, 2022). Similarly, other authors highlight that the personalization of the message and the aestheticization of politics have displaced rationalized programmatic discourse, privileging immediacy and symbolic affinity (Darwin & Haryanto, 2021; Vallés et al., 2021).

H2. The evidence also corroborated that formats and narratives with emotional and visual elements generated greater interaction and connection among young people. Quantitatively, EI influenced CPE ($\beta = 0.687$), while interviews revealed that emotions such as outrage, empathy, and enthusiasm motivated users to share or reject content. This demonstrates that emotion is not a complement, but rather the core that mobilizes political action on social media. Similar results have been reported in studies analyzing the primacy of affective dynamics in shaping electoral behavior (Alhaimer, 2025; Belcastro et al., 2022; Lever & Elliot, 2023; Nwozor et al., 2022). Likewise, studies on the use of everyday and emotional narratives highlight that authenticity and emotional resonance carry more weight than programmatic rationality (Ayub et al., 2024; Cuervo & González, 2024; Larsson et al., 2024; Stromer-Galley & Rossini, 2024).

H3. Patterns of consumption, dissemination, and interpretation of political content were clearly identified. In the structural model, PC showed little direct influence on critical evaluation ($\beta = 0.004$), but in the qualitative phase, reappropriation, the use of hashtags, and cultural codes appeared as forms of symbolic consumption beyond the institutional sphere. This result is in line with studies describing the emergence of performative and symbolic practices as dominant forms of youth participation (Adamczewska, 2024; Fazio et al., 2023; Mohd Suki et al., 2023; Ummar et al., 2023). It has also been documented that algorithmic environments foster an “expanded political presence” through memes, challenges, and ephemeral interactions that nevertheless shape political identities and behaviors (Cranmer et al., 2024; Haugsgjerd & Karlsen, 2024; Smolak Lozano, 2024; Tunkl et al., 2023).

H4. Symbolic, affective, and cultural factors were decisive in shaping young people’s political decisions. The model showed that CPE reached an R^2 of 0.967, largely explained by EI ($f^2 = 6.844$), which highlights the weight of emotions in symbolic interpretation. Participants also pointed out that authenticity and cultural proximity were more relevant than programmatic proposals. This finding converges with recent research that highlights how emotional and cultural identification prevails in the configuration of political preferences (Cristófol-Rodríguez et al., 2024; Geise et al., 2024; Gerbaudo, 2024; Magin et al., 2024). Similarly, other authors demonstrate that micro-stories and affective narratives embedded in everyday life reinforce symbolic belonging and identity as determining factors in electoral decisions (Bhardwaj et al., 2024; Hatcher, 2025; Oschatz et al., 2024; Persico, 2024).

H5. Digital campaigns were found to have a direct effect on youth voting intentions, with the PE explained at 82.8%. CV emerged as the most decisive predictor ($\beta = 0.935$), confirming that rational understanding continues to play a central role in activating electoral decision-making. This result refines previous explanations by distinguishing between symbolic participation and final electoral behavior, in line with findings showing that virality and emotional identification attract attention but do not automatically translate into votes (Chan et al., 2023; Dey et al., 2023; Guess et al., 2023; Lestaluhu et al., 2023). Furthermore, recent research indicates that algorithmic environments intensify symbolic participation, but cognitive evaluation is indispensable for consolidating political decisions (Grant & Lyons, 2025; Rivera Magos & González Pureco, 2024; Subekti et al., 2025).

Several hypothesized relationships were not statistically supported, warranting critical reflection. The path from DNC to PE (DNC \rightarrow PE; $\beta = 0.154$, $p = 0.184$) was not significant, suggesting that exposure to digital narratives alone does not directly translate into voting behavior without cognitive mediation. Similarly, PC showed no direct effect on CCE (PC \rightarrow CCE; $\beta = 0.004$, $p = 0.425$), indicating that mere consumption of political content does not automatically activate critical assessment among young voters. The weak relationship between CCE and PE (CCE \rightarrow PE; $\beta = 0.095$, $p = 0.552$) suggests that critical thinking, while present, may not be a decisive factor in final electoral decisions when emotional and cultural dimensions dominate. Finally, CV did not influence CCE (CV \rightarrow CCE; $\beta = -0.010$, $p = 0.400$), indicating that rational understanding operates independently from critical assessment processes.

These findings contrast with studies in European and North American contexts, where critical media literacy has shown stronger effects on political participation (Stromer-Galley & Rossini, 2024). This contrast

may reflect cultural differences in political socialization: Latin American youth appear to prioritize affective and symbolic dimensions over rational-critical evaluation when forming electoral preferences. Conversely, studies in African contexts (Nwozor et al., 2022) and Asian settings (Mohd Suki et al., 2023) report similar patterns to our findings, where emotional engagement outweighs critical deliberation in youth political behavior. This suggests that the primacy of affect in digital political participation may be characteristic of emerging democracies with high social media penetration and lower institutional trust, rather than a universal phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that digital campaigns have permanently transformed the ways in which young people participate in politics, shifting the focus of electoral decision-making from rational programmatic discourse to symbolic, emotional, and performative dimensions. Political communication on social media is now structured around narratives that generate authenticity, resonance, and identification in algorithmic environments. This transformation redefines the political socialization of young people and establishes a scenario where democratic representation is primarily constructed in digital spaces.

The study confirms that the effectiveness of digital political content lies in its ability to integrate into the cultural codes of youth, using humor, aesthetics, and emotions as tools for symbolic mobilization. Youth political behavior is organized around emotional bonds and community practices that displace traditional deliberative and ideological frameworks. This process consolidates digital culture as a legitimate space for citizen formation and determines the centrality of symbolic interactions in the construction of electoral decisions.

The results show that cognition and emotion act as complementary dimensions which, when integrated, jointly shape young people's political preferences. Digital citizenship is therefore defined by the constant interaction between rational and affective processes, consolidating a new communication paradigm in which politics is consumed, shared, and reinterpreted as a cultural product. This model eliminates the dichotomy between reason and emotion and establishes a hybrid logic that comprehensively explains contemporary electoral dynamics.

The research establishes that representative democracy is undergoing a process of structural reconfiguration, where young voters base their decisions on micro-narratives, ephemeral interactions, and symbolic experiences on digital platforms. Digital spaces are becoming central arenas in which legitimacy, leadership, and citizenship are defined, displacing the primacy of traditional channels. This scenario forces us to rethink the theoretical and practical foundations of political participation and places digital platforms and algorithms as determining actors in the configuration of the public sphere and the future sustainability of democratic systems.

The research consolidates a theoretical and methodological contribution by demonstrating that the mixed analysis of digital narratives and structural models allows for a more accurate understanding of the effect of campaigns on youth electoral decision-making. This approach confirms that the social sciences must integrate digital tools, algorithmic metrics, and qualitative approaches to explain contemporary political phenomena. In this way, the study not only expands the field of political communication but also establishes a frame of reference applicable to the design of electoral strategies and the formulation of public policies aimed at an active and conscious digital citizenry.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

The study focused on politically active urban youth with high digital access, which limits the generalization of the results to populations with lower connectivity. The use of self-reporting instruments introduced memory and desirability biases. The strong correlation between EI and CPE revealed a conceptual overlap that will be refined in future models. Subsequent research will extend the analysis to rural areas, incorporate real-time monitoring during electoral processes, and consider algorithmic and geopolitical factors in digital campaigns.

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